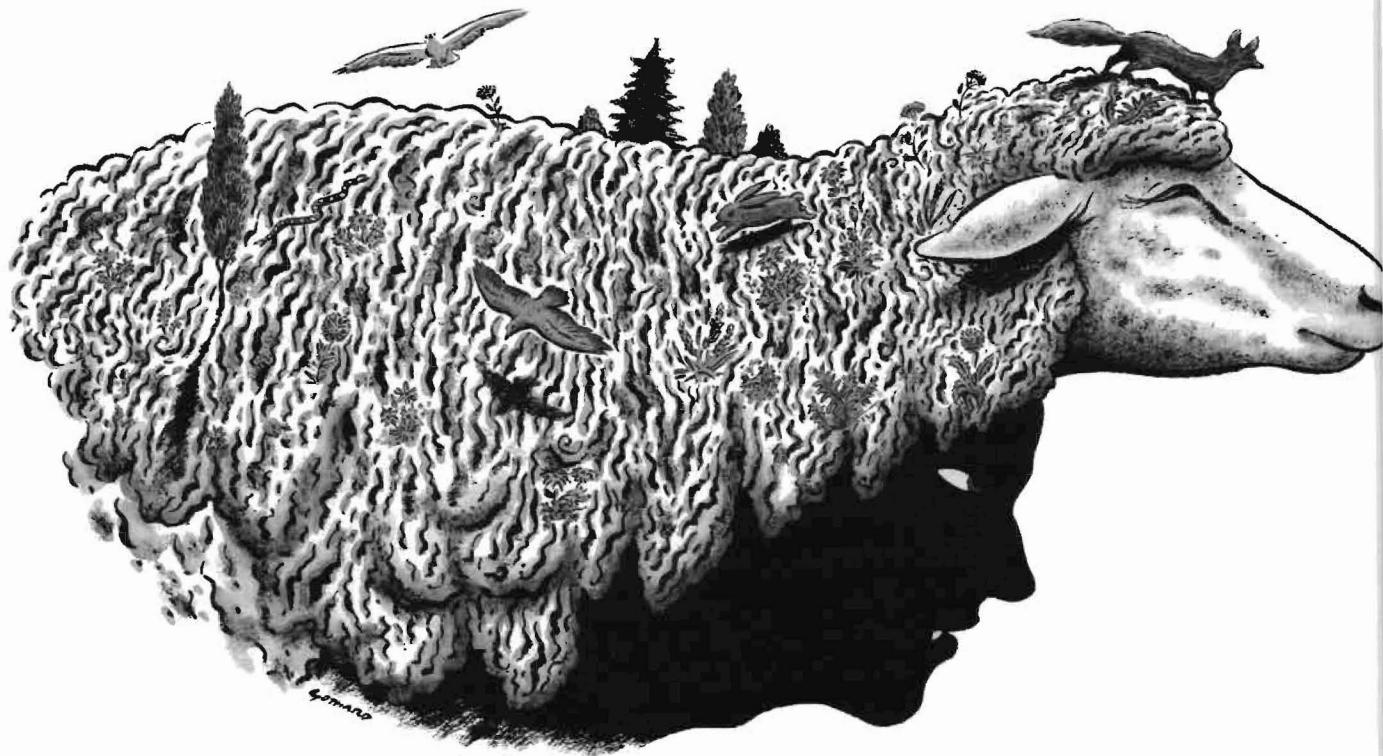


## EMERGING IDEAS



# The Big Business of Conservation

Corruption has destroyed America's mainstream environmental groups

by Johann Hari, from *The Nation*

I HAVE SPENT the past few years reporting on how global warming is remaking the map of the world. I have stood in half-dead villages on the coast of Bangladesh while families point to the rising ocean and say, "Do you see that chimney sticking up? That's where my house was." I have stood on the edges of the Arctic and watched glaciers that have existed for millennia crash into the sea. I have stood on the borders of dried-out Darfur and heard refugees explain, "The water dried up, and so we started to kill each other for what was left."

While I witnessed these early stages of ecocide, I imagined that American green groups were on these people's side in the corridors of Capitol Hill, trying to stop the Weather of Mass Destruction. But it is now clear that many were on a different path—one that began in the 1980s, when environmental groups like the National Wildlife Federation and the Nature Conservancy began accepting donations from the big polluters they'd previously fought.

Companies like Shell and British Petroleum were delighted. They saw it as valuable "reputation insurance": Every time they were criticized for their massive emissions of warming gases, or

an oil spill that had caused irreparable damage, they wheeled out their shiny green awards, purchased with "charitable" donations, to ward off the prospect of government regulation. At first, this behavior scandalized the environmental community. But slowly, other groups saw themselves shrink while the corporate-fattened groups swelled—so they, too, started to take the checks.

Christine MacDonald, an idealistic young environmentalist, discovered how deeply this cash had transformed these institutions when she started to work for Conservation International in 2006. As she explains in her whistle-blowing book *Green Inc.*, almost all the mainstream green organizations take money, and in turn they offer praise, even when the money comes from the companies causing environmental devastation. To take just one example, when it was revealed that many of IKEA's dining room sets were made from trees ripped from endangered forests, the World Wildlife Fund leapt to the company's defense when IKEA claimed—wrongly—that it "can never guarantee" this won't happen. Is it a coincidence that WWF is a "marketing partner" with IKEA, and takes cash from the company?

Likewise, MacDonald reports, the Sierra Club was approached in 2008 by the makers of Clorox bleach, who said that if the club endorsed their new range of "green" household cleaners, they would give it a percentage of the sales. The group's corporate accountability committee said the deal created a blatant conflict of interest—but took it anyway. Then-executive director Carl Pope defended the move in an e-mail to members, in which he claimed that the organization had carried out a serious analysis of the cleaners to see if they were "truly superior." But it hadn't. Jessica Frohman, cochair of the Sierra Club's toxics committee, said, "We never approved the product line."

The addiction to corporate cash has changed the green groups at their core. Imagine this happening in any other sphere, and it becomes clear how surreal it is. It is as though Amnesty International's human rights reports came sponsored by a coalition of the Burmese junta, Dick Cheney, and Robert Mugabe. For environmental groups to take funding from the very people who are destroying the environment is preposterous—yet it is now taken for granted.

This pattern was bad enough when it affected only a lousy household cleaning spray, or a single rare forest. But today, the stakes are unimaginably higher. We are living through a brief window of time in which we can still prevent runaway global warming. We have emitted so many warming gases into the atmosphere that the world's climate scientists say we are close to the climate's "point of no return."

You would expect U.S. conservation organizations to be joining the great activist upsurge demanding that we stick to a safe level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere: 350 parts per million, according to NASA climatologist James Hansen. But leaders of mainstream groups including the Sierra Club have come to see the world through the funnel of the U.S. Senate and what legislation it can be immediately coaxed to pass. They say there is no point in advocating a strategy that senators will reject flat out. They have to be "politically

realistic" and advocate something that will appeal to Blue Dog Democrats.

This focus on inch-by-inch reform would normally be understandable: Every movement for change needs a reformist wing. But if we exceed the safe amount of warming gases in the atmosphere, then the earth will release its massive carbon stores and we will have runaway warming. After that, any cuts we introduce will be useless. You can't jump halfway across

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a chasm: You still fall to your death. It is all or disaster.

If a bill can pass through today's Senate, it will not be enough to prevent catastrophic global warming. Why? Because the bulk of the Senate—including many Democrats—is owned by Big Oil and Big Coal. They call the shots with their campaign donations. So if you call only for measures the Senate could pass tomorrow, you are in effect giving the fossil fuel industry a veto over the position of the green groups.

There is a different way for green groups to behave. If the existing political system is so corrupt that it can't maintain basic human safety, they should be encouraging their members to take direct action to break the Big Oil deadlock. This is precisely what has happened in Britain, and it has worked. Direct-action protesters have physically blocked coal trains and new airport runways for the past five years. Airport runway projects that looked certain are falling by the wayside, and politicians have become very nervous about authorizing any new coal power plants.

By pretending that the broken system can work—and will work, in just a moment, after just one more Democratic win, or another—the big green groups are preventing the appropriate response from concerned citizens, which is fury at the system itself. They are offering placebos to calm us down when they should be conducting and amplifying our anger at this betrayal of our safety by our politicians. The U.S. climate bills are long-term plans: They lock us into a woefully inadequate schedule of carbon cuts all the way to 2050. So when green groups cheer them on, they are giving their approval to a path to destruction—and calling it progress.

SOME OF the U.S. conservation groups took this attitude to the Copenhagen summit in December, demanding a course of action that will lead to environmental disaster—and financial benefits for themselves.

When President Obama promises to cut emissions—by a tenth of what the science requires—you assume the United States will emit fewer warming gases. But that's not how it works. Instead, the rich countries are saying they will trawl across the world to find the cheapest place to cut emissions, and pay for it to happen there.

The chopping down of the world's forests is causing 12 percent of all emissions of greenhouse gases, because trees store carbon dioxide. So the rich governments say that if they pay to stop some of that, they can claim it as part of their cuts. A program

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called REDD—Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation—has been set up to do just that.

When you are paying to stop deforestation, there are different ways of measuring whether you are succeeding. You can take one small “subnational” area, a certain swath of forest, and save that. Or you can look at an entire country, and try to save a reasonable proportion of its forests. National targets are much better—it’s harder for a logging company, kicked out of the newly preserved forest, to simply move a few miles up the road and carry on. The move from Brazil to Congo or Indonesia is much heftier, and fewer loggers will make it.

Yet several groups—like the Nature Conservancy and Conservation International—have lobbied for sub-national targets to be at the core of REDD and the U.S. climate bills. The groups issued a joint statement with some of the worst polluters—American Electric Power, Duke Energy, the El Paso Corporation—saying they would call for subnational targets now, while vaguely aspiring to national targets at some point down the line.

There is a broad rumble of anger across the grassroots environmental movement at this position. “At Copenhagen, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing,” says Kevin Koenig of Amazon Watch, an organization that sides with indigenous peoples in the Amazon basin to preserve their land. “These groups are positioning themselves to be the middlemen in a carbon market. They are helping to set up, in effect, a global system of carbon laundering . . . that will give the impression of action, but no substance. You have to ask—are these conservation groups at all? They look much more like industry front groups to me.”

**HOW DO WE**  
retrieve a real environmental movement, in the very short time we have left? Charles

Komanoff, who worked as a consultant for the Natural Resources Defense Council for 30 years, says, “We’re close to a civil war in the environmental movement. For too long, all the oxygen in the room has been sucked out by this beast of these insider groups, who achieve almost nothing. . . . We need to create new organizations that represent the fundamentals of environmentalism and have real goals.”

Some of the failing green groups can be reformed from within. The Sierra Club is a democratic organization, with the leadership appointed by its members. Carl Pope was recently replaced by Mike Brune, formerly of the Rainforest Action Network, a group much more aligned with the radical demands of the climate science. But other organizations—like Conservation International and the Nature Conservancy—seem incapable of internal reform and simply need to be shunned.

Already, shining alternatives are starting to rise up across America. In just a year, the brilliant 350.org has formed a huge network of enthusiastic activists who are demanding that our politicians heed the real scientific advice—not the parody of it offered by the impostors. They have to displace the corrupt conservationists as the voice of American environmentalism, fast.

This will be a difficult and ugly fight, when we need all our energy to take on the forces of ecocide. But these conservation groups increasingly resemble the forces of ecocide draped in a green cloak. If we don’t build a real, unwavering environmental movement soon, we had better get used to a new sound—of trees crashing down and an ocean rising, followed by the muffled, private applause of America’s “conservationists.” **UR**



Johann Hari is a columnist for *The Independent* in London. Excerpted from *The Nation* (March 22, 2010), a vital progressive voice that weighs in weekly on politics, arts, and culture via vivid features, incisive reviews, and convention-busting commentary.

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## Nation Piece Causes Stir

Johann Hari's *Nation* article touched a nerve among green groups, especially those cast in an unflattering light. Several of them wrote to *The Nation* to take issue with Hari's analysis (adjacent story), but mostly they seemed shocked by the impertinence of a liberal publication going after green groups.

“What will *The Nation* do next, blame polar bears for global warming?” wrote Christine Dorsey of the National Wildlife Federation.

Others weighed in to praise the author. “Congratulations to Johann Hari for the courage to ‘out’ what many have been whispering about for a long time,” wrote Kevin Koenig of Amazon Watch.

Some felt that Hari's piece omitted important victories in favor of reporting more sensational transgressions. “It was the Sierra Club,” wrote Carl Pope, the group's former executive director, “that helped bring the original suit that led to the Supreme Court decision that spurred the EPA to begin regulating global warming pollution.”

And yet others used the forum to trumpet their own policies and approaches. “For 40 years, Greenpeace has maintained our financial independence, refusing money from corporations,” wrote Greenpeace executive director Phil Radford.

Hari mounted a point-by-point defense and remained uncowed and unrepentant. (*The Nation*, it's worth noting, has not conceded or corrected any factual errors in the story.)

“There is something lacking from many of these responses,” Hari concluded. “Do these people feel no concern that America's leading environmental groups are hoovering up cash from the worst polluters and advocating policies that fall far short of what scientists say we need to survive the climate crisis safely?” —Keith Goetzman

To see the responses, visit [www.utne.com/BadGreen](http://www.utne.com/BadGreen).